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CONCEPTIONS OF VIRGINITY

Metaphorical, Punitive, and Pedagogical Blindness in Hell

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Abstract

What is the role of the blind body in hell? Does it gesture to broader cultural conceptions of physical impairment? Can the blind be healed in places of eternal punishment? Does this 'healing' function similarly to the understandings of blindness available in contemporaneous medical texts? This article will examine the depictions of the blind in the extra-canonical apocalypses that describe hell. We will begin with a discussion of the apocalyptic tours of hell that describe blindness, paying special attention to the different roles (metaphorical, punitive, and pedagogical) that blindness plays in each text. We will also consider the impact that these understandings of the disabled body have upon the readers of apocalyptic texts when placed alongside other impaired and disfigured bodies in hell. We will compare the distinct approaches to blindness that we find in the apocalyptic tours of hell with other ancient attitudes toward blindness found within both Greek and Roman depictions of Hades and broader culture. By comparing these different ancient depictions of hell we will observe the ways in which blindness is used to depict both eternal punishment and spiritual enlightenment. We will reflect upon the ways in which early Christians appropriated and modified Greek and Roman understandings of blindness in Hades in their own visions of hell. Finally, we will use our analysis to draw conclusions about the role of sight and blindness within apocalyptic theology.

1. Where the metaphor meets the road: Real bodies and pedagogical bodies in hell

Within the early Christian apocalypses that depict tours of hell there are several instances in which the damned are 'blind', configuring visual impairment as a punishment that is correlated to a specific sin.[1] In each of these cases, blindness is interpreted by the apocalyptic seer's vision as a punishment for some kind of ignorance, employing the ancient *topos* of blindness as a metaphor for a person's ethical or philosophical obtuseness.[2] Unlike the instances of metaphorical blindness that we find in other ancient literature, in these apocalyptic visions of hell the theoretical link between the metaphor and the body

[1] *Apoc. Zeph.* 10; *Apoc. Pet.* 12; *Apoc. Paul* 40.

[2] See for instance, the spiritualized interpretation of the 'man born blind' in *John* 9 or the vituperation against the Pharisees as 'blind guides' in *Matth.* 23:16-26.

Studia Patristica LXXXI, 139-151.

is substantiated – real bodies are physically changed in order to reflect individual spiritual cognition and ethical success. In these depictions of hell a theology of bodily and spiritual impairment emerges, in which the blind body is a marker for spiritual ignorance, envisioning soteriology in terms of bodily perfection. As we will see, these visions of hell emphasize that the torments are inscribed upon real bodies, making a direct link to the disabled body on earth. Furthermore, the apocalyptic visions of hell make the pedagogical import of punitive blindness explicit so that ethics and bodily impairment are inextricable. Situated within apocalypses that privilege 'sight' as a means of enlightenment and salvation, the depictions of blindness in hell heighten the impact of the ancient 'physiognomic consciousness', constructing a theology in which the blind body is synonymous with ethical failure.[3]

Within the secondary scholarship on other early Christian texts that discuss blindness there is an alarming tendency to replicate the ablest agenda of the ancient texts. 'Ableism' is when culturally defined beliefs about the body (usually developed and perpetuated by an able-bodied culture, but not always) are used to marginalize disability and disabled persons. In this particular context, ableism takes the form of emphasizing the negative representations of blindness. Warren Carter has observed this phenomenon in his post-colonial critique of the story of the man born blind in *John* 9, demonstrating that modern interpreters often internalize the physiognomic consciousness of the ancient texts they are reading.[4] Carter's analysis of the secondary scholarship highlights the

[3] Scholars have argued that the Greek and Roman worlds shared a 'physiognomic consciousness' in which physical appearance and ethical behavior are correlated so that ethical behavior is emphasized. See Robert Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithaca, 1995), 87-104; Nicholas Vlahogiannis, 'Disabling Bodies', in Dominic Monsterrat (ed.), *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings: Studies on the Human Body in Antiquity* (New York, 1998), 13-36, esp. 15-23; Mikeal Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke-Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, 2006); Chad Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts: The Use of Physcial Features in Characterization* (Leiden, 2008), 146-55.

[4] Warren Carter, 'The blind, the lame and paralyzed' (John 5:3): John's Gospel, Disability Studies, and Postcolonial Perspectives', in Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper (eds), *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* (New York, 2011), 129-50, see especially 131. Carter summarizes: 'Evidencing an (unstated) physiognomic consciousness, these interpreters screen out the man's physical disability, rendering it invisible behind his supposed abundant failures of character'. Martha Lynn Rose, *The Staff of Oedipus: Transforming Disability in Ancient Greece* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2003), 79, also calls into question the sweeping generalizations that are made about blindness in the ancient world, arguing that scholars bring modern ableism to bear on the ancient world when they do so. As she says, 'it is fallacious to transfer attitudes seen in the grand sweep of legend and tragedy to everyday life and to generalize that "many Greeks viewed blindness as a fate worse than death. They saw blindness as a punishment from the gods"'. Lisa Trentin, 'Exploring Visual Impairment in Ancient Rome', in Christian Laes, C.F. Goodey, and M. Lynn Rose (eds), *Disabilities in Roman Antiquity: Disparate Bodies A Capite ad Calcem* (Leiden, 2013), 89-114, makes a point similar to Rose's about the understanding of blindness in ancient Rome.

way in which ancient and modern attitudes toward blindness are almost indistinguishable, effacing the disabled body as a mere 'tool' for able-bodied onlookers who might learn from spiritualizing the man's disability. With respect to the tours of hell, a similar interpretive framework is operative. In her explanation of punitive blindness in hell, Martha Himmelfarb remarks that although the sins in the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* and the *Apocalypse of Peter* are not exactly the same, in both cases blindness is 'an appropriate punishment', because 'it is the physical actualization of the lack of self-awareness or self-criticism that allows the sins to come into being'.[5] Although Himmelfarb probably means that the punishments are 'appropriate' in the sense that they reflect the ancient standard of *lex talionis*, she appears to have internalized ancient attitudes toward blindness, arguing that visual impairment is the logical physical instantiation of the ignorant or uncritical person. Even if she does mean to make this simile as an observation on ancient thought patterns, she does so implicitly, presenting a value judgment about the 'fitness' of blindness as a punishment for ignorance as if it were a widely accepted fact.[6]

As a corrective for the scholarly tendency to apply uncritically ancient notions of blindness as an outward symbol of one's moral character, Carter demonstrates that spiritualized or metaphorical readings of disability can have an invisibilizing effect on the disabled body. Carter states:

> While disabled and diseased bodies provide compelling metaphors or representations of healed or disabled or diseased civic/colonial bodies, they can, like spiritualized readings of the healings in John's Gospel, invisibilize literal disabled and diseased bodies.[7]

[5] Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadephia, 1983), 105.

[6] Himmelfarb is not alone in this blunt application of ancient attitudes toward blindness, and arguably is able to make this rhetorical move because of the prevalence of this attitude toward visual impairment in our own social world. For other examples see W. Carter, 'The blind, lame and paralyzed' (2011), 131. As M.L. Rose, *Staff of Oedipus* (2003), 92-3, cautions: 'the Greeks' concept of vision had little do with the modern one. There was no measured scale of vision, from perfect sight to legal blindness. One saw, even if only a little, or one did not see. Either condition could be reversed in an instant. No one in the Greek world was immune to blindness. Most of us in the developed world live in the luxury of assuming that we will not – among other fates – become blind. In the ancient world, it was perhaps more reasonable to assume that one would lose at least some of one's sight. It follows that in the ancient world, sighted people knew blind and sight-impaired people well enough to understand the abilities and limitations of failing vision and that there was not the cultural gulf between the sighted and the blind that exists today'.

[7] W. Carter, 'The blind, lame and paralyzed' (2011), 137. Here Carter's post-colonial critique of metaphorical readings of disability is dependent upon the theoretical work of Fanon, Sontag, Rushdie, and Mitchell. See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York, 1968); Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York, 1977); Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (New York, 1991); David T. Mitchell, 'Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor', in Sharon L. Snyde, Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (eds), *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities* (New York, 2002), 15-30.

Carter's post-colonial reading against the tendency to see disability in ancient texts as purely metaphorical demands that we consider *how* these metaphors work in relationship to actual disabled bodies. In his own reading of *John*, Carter has argued that the emphasis on metaphorical blindness results in the effacement of the man born blind, as part of an imperial agenda to subjugate difference. As we explore metaphorical, punitive and pedagogical blindness in early Christian depictions of hell, we will see that in hell punitive blindness functions differently, although the ultimate rhetorical effect is similar. Here the blind are hyper-visible, as monuments to particular sins, so that their earthly life is reinterpreted as a 'living hell'. The apocalyptic imagery of blindness interprets visual impairment as an ethical marker of divine punishment that is easily avoided or escaped through simple catechesis and repentance. As we compare these early Christian attitudes toward blindness with the Greek and Roman depictions of Hades we will notice that the early Christian apocalypses apply the ancient *topos* of metaphorical blindness to the physical bodies of the damned. In this regard the depictions of the blind in hell appropriate the pedagogical rhetoric of the empire in order to engender a novel status quo of ethical and physical conformity.

2. Blindness in Christian hell

In the apocalyptic texts that depict hell there are three main passages that use blindness to depict eternal punishment: *Apoc. Zeph.* 10, *Apoc. Pet.* 12 and *Apoc. Paul* 40.[8] In the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*,[9] Zephaniah sees the souls in torment in Hades, starting with those who accepted bribes (hands and feet are

[8] M. Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell* (1983) 104-5, 142-3 uses these passages as evidence for her hypothesis about the relationship between the apocalypses that document tours of hell. She argues that the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* and the *Apocalypse of Peter* were composed independently from a shared tradition of fiery punishments, and that the *Apocalypse of Paul* knew both of these texts.

[9] Despite its likely origin as a Jewish text, the citation of this text by Clement (*Strom.* V 11.77), its preservation in the White monastery of Shenuda, and its use of the term 'catechumen' all suggest that it had a later Christian readership, and is thus relevant to our conversation here (although in many cases the categories 'Jewish' and 'Christian' are transcended in the pseudepigrapha). The *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* is dated between 100 BCE and 70 CE. The text is extant in Coptic fragments, which are thought to be translations of the Greek original (no longer extant). See O.S. Wintermute, 'Apocalypse of Zephaniah', in James H Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y, 1983), 1:500-1. While Wintermute does note that despite the text's preservation in a Christian monastery, there are no signs that the text was modified, later scholarship has argued that the extant fragments do reflect distinctively Christian concerns. For summary and discussion of these Christian elements, and the justification of a 'Jewish-Christian milieu' as the original context for the Coptic fragments see Bernd J. Diebner, *Zephanjas Apokalypsen* (Gütersloh, 2003), 1230; Jan N. Bremmer, 'Tours of Hell: Greek, Roman, Jewish and Early Christian', in Walter Ameling (ed.), *Topographie des Jenseits: Studien zur Geschichte des Todes in Kaiserzeit und Spätantike* (Stuttgart, 2011), 13-34, 29-30.

bound) and those who lent money and accepted interest (covered with mats of fire), and proceeding finally to the imperfect catechumens:

> And also I saw some blind ones crying out. And I was amazed when I saw all these works of God. I said 'Who are these?' He said to me, 'These are the catechumens who heard the word of God, but they were not perfected in the work which they heard.' And I said to him, 'Then do they not have repentance here?' He said, 'Yes', I said 'How long?' He said to me, 'Until the day when the Lord will judge'.[10]

In Zephaniah's vision of hell we have a concretization of the ancient conception of metaphorical blindness. Unlike other ancient texts that associate blindness with misunderstanding or ignorance metaphorically or metonymically,[11] in Zephaniah's vision of hell actual visual impairment is invoked as the consequence for an intellectual sin. Here blindness is depicted as a physical punishment that is on par with the bondage or bodily encasement in mats of fire that precedes it, causing those who are punished to 'cry out'. What is more, the description of this punishment is directly followed by a discussion of the hair on the bodies of the damned in Hades, emphasizing that the sinners in torment have real bodies that are analogous to earthly bodies.[12] In this way, the punitive blindness in the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* heightens the rhetorical effect of the ancient blindness-trope by offering a literal interpretation: not only are the ignorant 'like the blind', but here in Hades they actually are blind.

Although the punitive blindness in *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* is indicative of a physical reality, there is still a causal link to the notion of spiritual or intellectual opacity. Zephaniah's guide interprets this embodied blindness as a punishment for spiritual benightedness, explaining that these are the catechumens

[10] O. S. Wintermute, 'Apocalypse of Zephaniah' (1983), 1:500-1. See also M. Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell* (1983), 13-6, 151-3, who argues that the text is likely a relatively early Jewish work. While the Greek original is thought to be from this earlier period, the Coptic fragments are much later, perhaps as late as the fourth century. See B.J. Diebner, *Zephanjas Apokalypsen* (2003), 1141-246; J.N. Bremmer, 'Tours of Hell' (2011), 29-30. The text is preserved in two fragmentary manuscripts: a two-page Sahidic manuscript from the fifth century CE, and an eighteen-page Akhmimic manuscript from the fourth century CE. There is also a short quotation (in Greek) from Clement, *Strom*. V 11.77, which is not found in either passage. The Coptic texts and a German translation are available in G. Steindorff, *Die Apokalypse des Elias, eine unbekannte Apokalypse und Bruchstücke der Sophonias-Apokalypse* (Leipzig, 1899), 34-65. The English translations cited are from O.S. Wintermute, 'Apocalypse of Zephaniah' (1983), 1:508-15.

[11] There are countless examples of this theme in ancient literature. A particularly salient example is recorded in an inscription from the Asclepion at Epidaurus, in which a woman named Ambrosia who was blind in one eye ridicules the cures at the sanctuary, and is only healed after she repents by offering a silver pig at the sanctuary as a memorial of her ignorance. See stele A4 in Lynn R. LiDonnici, *The Epidaurian Miracle Inscriptions: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Atlanta, 1995). For a succinct summary of other ancient texts that link blindness and ignorance see C. Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness* (2008), 73-81.

[12] *Apoc. Zeph.* 10: 'And I saw others with their hair on them. I said, "Then there is hair and body in this place?" He said, "Yes, the Lord gives body and hair to them as he desires"'.

who have heard, but are 'not perfected', those who did not apply what they had learned in their earthly life. The sin of the imperfect catechumens is one of only three sins that are singled out in this text (compared with the dozens of sins listed in other depictions of hell), fitting with the overall emphasis on personal accountability in the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*.[13] In this scene of judgment we find an explicit pedagogical message. The blind are not necessarily blind forever, but have the opportunity to repent prior to the final judgment. Punitive blindness, then, is a means of remedial education for those who did not properly learn from the word of God on earth. As such, the pedagogical orientation of the punishment allows for the possibility that blindness can be escaped after the damned have endured blindness for a time. Blindness is presented as the result of failed pedagogy, and also as a pejorative kind of educational experience in and of itself, offering a salvific lesson for the damned who failed to learn this lesson on earth.

In the *Apocalypse of Peter* 12, Peter witnesses the punishment of those who claim to be righteous but are not:

> And near to this torment are blind and dumb men and women whose raiment is white. They are packed closely together and fall on coals of unquenchable fire. These are they who give alms and say, 'we are righteous before God', while they have not striven for righteousness.[14]

[13] Earlier in the text, in *Apoc. Zeph.* 7-8, the reader learns that a manuscript containing every one of a person's misdeeds (including missed opportunities for prayer!) will be unrolled and read by an accusing angel at a trial in which the 'good and evil will be weighed in a balance'. The seer reports that his own misdeeds include missed opportunities to do good deeds, such as not visiting the sick, widowed, and orphaned, and missed opportunities for prayer and fasting. In this context, the unperfected catechumens appear to be those whose shortcomings outweigh their good deeds, failing to properly internalize the 'word of God'.

[14] We are working under the hypothesis that the *Apocalypse of Peter* was written sometime in the second century CE, and that the Ethiopic text represents the earliest strand of the text, closest to the original (no longer extant) Greek text. As Richard Bauckham, 'The Two Fig Tree Parables in the Apocalypse of Peter', *JBL* 104 (1985), 269-87, 270, notes, the Ethiopic MS is unreliable in some ways, but is still the best text available to scholars. See, for instance, the translation problems demonstrated by Julian Victor Hills, 'Parables, Pretenders, and Prophecies: Translation and Interpretation in the *Apocalypse of Peter* 2', *RB* 98 (1991), 560-73. For discussion of the Greek textual tradition, see Thomas J. Kraus and Tobias Nicklas, *Das Petrusevangelium und die Petrusapokalypse: Die griechischen Fragmente mit deutscher und englischer Übersetzung* (Berlin, 2004), 81-5; Peter van Minnen, 'The Greek *Apocalypse of Peter*', in Jan N. Bremmer and István Czachesz (eds), *The Apocalypse of Peter* (Leuven, 2003), 15-39. For discussion of the idea that Akhm. 2 is a witness to the *Gospel of Peter* see, Tobias Nicklas, 'Zwei petrinische Apokryphen im Akhmim-Codex oder eines? Kritische Anmerkungen und Gedanken', *Apocrypha* 16 (2005), 75-96; *id*., 'Die Leiblichkeit der Gepeinigten: Das Petrusevangelium und antike Märtyrerakten', in J. Leemans (ed.), *Persecution and Martyrdom in Late Antique Christianity: Festschrift Boudewijn Dehandschutter* (Leuven, 2010), 195-219. Unless otherwise noted, English translations are from C. Detlef and G. Müller, 'Apocalypse of Peter', in Wilhelm Schneemelcher and Edgar Hennecke (eds), *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. Wilson (Louisville, KY, 1991), 625-38.

Like the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, blindness is invoked in this passage as a consequence of ethical failure.[15] Specifically, blindness is the direct result of a failure to live out the virtues of the Sermon on the Mount, falsely announcing one's righteousness in public.[16] This use of blindness as a punishment can be compared to ancient literary tropes that link ethical action to physical perception, but in this case punitive blindness makes the link between bodily impairment and ethical failure much stronger.[17] While Himmelfarb has evaluated the link between 'the lack of self-awareness' and the punishment of blindness here as 'appropriate', presumably as a measure-for-measure punishment, the sin that is described here is not one of faulty perception or ignorance, but rather conspicuous piety and ethical inactivity.[18] Of course, Himmelfarb is not concerned with the way in which the bodily torments would relate to the real bodies in the text's audience, but her attempt to make sense of the text's logic solely from the perspective of *lex talionis* has the unfortunate effect of obscuring the way in which the *Apocalypse of Peter* actually extends the metaphor of blindness. Here the blind are not simply imagined as those who have committed perceptual sins, but they are more specifically conceived as those who conspicuously present themselves as righteous, but are ethically lazy.

Within the context of the *Apocalypse of Peter* there is also a pedagogical dimension to punitive blindness, offering the reader an opportunity to learn from the fate of these sinners in hell. Immediately following the description of the unrighteous almsgivers who are wearing white garments in chapter 12,[19] *Apoc. Pet.* 13 presents

[15] In antiquity being 'dumb' can refer to an inability to speak, a mental disability, or both. See the tale of Kroisos' disabled son who was 'deaf and dumb' (κωφός and ἄφωνος): Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.34.2 and 1.85.4. The Latin terms for deafness were *surditas* and *surdus*. See the discussion of Herodotean subversion in this story in R. Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder* (1995), 96-7.

[16] See especially *Matth.* 6:1-4. For further discussion of the ways in which the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount are reinforced through the pedagogical message of the *Apocalypse of Peter*, see Meghan Henning, *Educating Early Christians through the Rhetoric of Hell: 'Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth', in Matthew and the Early Church* (Tübingen, 2014), 174-223. For discussion of the rhetoric of blindness in *Matthew* see Candida R. Moss, 'Blurred Vision and Ethical Confusion: the Rhetorical Function of Matthew 6:22-23', *CBQ* 73 (2011), 757-76.

[17] Compare, for instance, the connection between auditory perception and ethical action at the end of the Sermon on the Mount (*Matth.* 7:24-6). Those who hear the words of Jesus and do not act on them are foolish, and their house is built on sand, but they are not deaf for all eternity as a result of their ethical inaction, and conversely, the deficiency is not in their perception, but their inactivity.

[18] M. Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell* (1983), 105, offers a contemporary psychological explanation of the sins in *Apoc. Zeph.* 10 and *Apoc. Pet.* 12 in order to read both as deserving of the punishment of 'blindness' in a measure for measure schema: 'The sin of the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, hearing but not fulfilling, is not exactly the same as the sin of the *Apocalypse of Peter*, claiming to be righteous but not striving for righteousness. Blindness is an appropriate punishment for both, however. It is the physical actualization of the lack of self-awareness or self-criticism that allows the sins to come into being'.

[19] See also the use of metaphorical blindness to describe the lukewarm Christians of *Rev.* 3:15-20, who are also instructed to don white robes. In John's apocalypse, however, the blind do not even know that they are blind, and need to be told that they are blind and naked, in need of robes and salve for their eyes.

the 'elect and righteous' who wear the garments of eternal life. For the readers of the text the ethical lesson is explicit, contrasting the blind sinners who are damned with the eternal life of the righteous. Parallel to the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, the question of repentance is raised. Here, however, the unrighteous learn that there is 'no more time for repentance', and thus, their blindness is not temporary (as it could be in the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*), but permanent. In this depiction of hell, then, the blind are a pedagogical object, and not pedagogical subjects. Blindness is still inextricably linked with sin, but eternally so, making the theological equation of visual impairment and ethical failure inescapable. Since the souls in the text cannot escape, the blind body in hell is educational for earthly bodies, holding up eternal blindness as a horrific consequence.[20] As we will see, this fusion of the punitive and the pedagogical notions of blindness within a concept of eternal punishment is unique to these apocalyptic texts.

In the *Apocalypse of Paul* we have a much later example of the development of the notion of punitive blindness, which explicitly draws upon both of the earlier texts.[21] Paul sees these sinners, who are identified by their clothing and their practice of giving alms:

> And I looked and saw men and women clothed in bright clothing, whose eyes were blind, and they were set in a pit of fire; and I asked: 'Who are these, sir?' And he said to me: 'They are the heathen who gave alms and did not know the Lord God; therefore they pay unceasingly their own particular penalty'.[22]

Here, the sin is described using the language of intellect, they 'do not know God', depicting their 'heathen' identity as the consequence of ignorance.[23] In the

[20] See also, *Apoc. Pet.* 13, which evaluates these punishments as 'just', indicating that the theological evaluation of blindness as a fitting punishment for conspicuous piety and ethical torpor is considered to be a matter of divine justice.

[21] M. Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell* (1983), 105, argues that the *Apoc. Paul* 40 combines aspects of the depictions of punitive blindness in *Apoc. Zeph.* 10 (they are non-Christians), and *Apoc. Pet.* 12 (alms and the clothing of the sinners), demonstrating a familiarity with both traditions.

[22] *Apoc. Paul* 40. Unlesss otherwise noted, the English translations of the *Apocalypse of Paul* are from Hugo Duensing and Aurelio de Santos Otero, 'Apocalypse of Paul', in W. Schneemelcher and E. Hennecke (eds), *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. Wilson (1991). The Latin is available in Theodore Silverstein and A. Hilhorst (eds), *Apocalypse of Paul: A New Critical Edition of Three Long Latin Versions* (Genève, 1997). The original text of the *Apocalypse of Paul* was likely written around 400 CE, since it was cited by Augustine in 416 CE (*Tract. Ev. Jo.* 98.8). For a summary of the argument supporting the date of 400 CE, see Richard Bauckham, 'The Four Apocalypses of the Virgin Mary', in *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Atlanta, 1998), 332-62, 336; Pierluigi Piovanelli, 'The Miraculous Discovery of the Hidden Manuscript, or the Paratextual Function of the Prologue to the *Apocalypse of Paul*', in Jan N. Bremmer and István Czachesz (eds), *The Visio Pauli and the Gnostic Apocalypse of Paul* (Leuven, 2007), 23-49; Jan N. Bremmer, '"Christian Hell": from the Apocalypse of Peter to the Apocalypse of Paul', *Numen* 56 (2009), 298-325, 303-7; J.N. Bremmer, 'Tours of Hell' (2011), 13-34.

[23] See also *Apoc. Paul* 31, for another ocular punishment, in which those who give nod to one another but secretly prepare evil are immersed in the river of fire up to their eyebrows. Here the immersion of the body past the eyes is used to punish the sin of false pretense.

context of the *Apocalypse of Paul* the heathen almsgivers are compared with the other sinners in hell who bear some outward marker of Christian faith but have failed to live out that faith consistently (such as the deacon who ate up the offerings in *Apoc. Paul* 36). As corporal punishment for dissemblance, blindness is placed on par with other horrific torments, including but not limited to immersion in the river of fire, hanging and stretching, and the invasion of one's bodily orifices with worms. As in the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, the *Apocalypse of Paul* imagines that these bodily torments are exacted on real bodies. In *Apoc. Paul* 15, for instance, the reader learns that the wicked will also experience bodily resurrection, so that they will receive their punishments in their own flesh.[24] In this context, the punitive blindness that is described in chapter 40 is corporeal, so that the only distinction between the blind persons in hell and the blind persons on earth is that in hell the blind are only culpable for one set of sins.

In the *Apocalypse of Paul*, as in each of the tours of hell we have examined, punitive blindness has a pedagogical function, designed to use the disabled body as an object lesson for the text's readers. As in the other tours of hell, the *Apocalypse of Paul* situates this punishment within an overall understanding of revelation, in which the righteous onlookers are intended to glean knowledge that will enable them to eschew ignorance in this life and bodily impairment in the next. In the *Apoc. Paul* 43, for instance, the wicked bemoan that although they had 'heard' about their being a judgment after death, they did not repent. These sad wicked persons are contrasted with the persons on earth, whom Paul hopes are able to both *perceive and repent*, reminding the audience that seeing is worthless unless it is coupled with repentance.[25] Here, as in each of the tours we have considered thus far, the pedagogical function of the apocalypse is framed in the language of perception, using the *topos* of sight that is common to the apocalyptic genre.[26] The audience is able to learn from these horrific punishments because the apocalyptic seer 'sees' and conveys what he sees to

[24] See also *Apoc. Paul* 14, where the angel tells souls to pay attention to the body they have left, because they will have to find this body at the resurrection; and *Apoc. Paul* 42, where some of the worst punishments are reserved for those who deny the bodily resurrection of Christ. As J.N. Bremmer, 'Christian Hell' (2009), 307-14, notes, the focus on doctrinal boundaries in the *Apocalypse of Paul* represents a shift in the function of Christian hell, no longer a means to separate insiders and outsiders, but a mechanism for social boundaries within the church. So the focus on the bodily resurrection can be seen as part of that shift.

[25] In response to the wicked who say 'for we did hear that there was a judgment before we came forth from the world, but tribulations and a wordly-minded life did not allow us to repent', Paul prays continually for those who are still on earth, that they might 'escape the judgment of punishments' (*Apoc. Paul* 43). See M. Henning, *Educating Early Christians* (2014), 194, for a discussion of the use and interpretation of Pauline imagery of 'ceaseless prayer' in hell.

[26] Wayne A. Meeks, 'Apocalyptic Discourse and Strategies of Goodness', *JR* 80 (2000), 461-75, 462, discusses the paraenetic function of 'seeing' in apocalyptic literature. On the generic features of 'apocalypse', see John J. Collins, 'Apocalypse: the Morphology of a Genre', *Semeia* 14 (1979), 1-19.

the audience.[27] The blind bodies in hell are the object of this sight, offering an educational opportunity to earthly audience members by equating eternal torment and the bodily reality of visual impairment.[28]

3. Blindness in the ancient world

In these apocalyptic visions of hell blindness is invoked simultaneously as a bodily punishment and as a tool for spiritual education, in a conception of blindness that offered an extremely literal interpretation of the idea that blindness was connected to other kinds of perceptual deficiencies. The question that remains is how this set of ideas would have been understood with respect to other cultural conceptions of blindness in antiquity. The idea that the gods punished human beings through blindness was widespread enough that in some cases, blindness is viewed as evidence of personal sin, as in *John* 9.[29] The metaphorical and pedagogical understandings of blindness were reflected in Platonic notions of vision in which sight is produced by an inner light that is emitted by the soul.[30] Centuries later, Galen updates this Platonic theory of vision, supporting it with anatomical data, reporting that light is transmitted through channels in the optic nerves so that the retinas are 'practically extensions of the brain'.[31] For both Plato and Galen vision is the product of understanding, and blindness is the result of intellectual or cognitive failure. These philosophies of sight and blindness are rearticulated in countless stories of

[27] See, for instance, the *Apoc. Pet.* 13, in which the language of perception is used to describe the experience of the 'elect and righteous', who 'see their desire on those who hate them' and who declare that 'we have heard and perceived that his judgment is good'; see also *Apoc. Paul* 21, in which Paul is invited by the angel to 'follow me further and I shall show you what you ought to tell openly and report', framing the rest of his vision as a lesson for the readers.

[28] J.N. Bremmer, 'Christian Hell' (2009), 315-6; István Czachesz, 'Torture in Hell and Reality', in J.N. Bremmer and I. Czachesz (eds), *The Visio Pauli and the Gnostic Apocalypse of Paul* (2007), 130-43, 143, both note that some of the punishments of hell parallel the tortures of the martyrs. Although the direction of influence cannot be determined, the shared imagery between the Acts of the Martyrs and the punishments of hell parallels the rhetorical situation that we are analyzing here, in which eternal punishments mirror bodily torment on earth. With respect to blindness, however, the 'reality' of earthly bodies is not interpreted triumphally.

[29] As N. Vlahogiannis, 'Disabling Bodies' (1998), 28-32, notes, when it is depicted as a punishment, blindness is usually associated with sexual sin (as for Oedipus and Teiresias). See also C. Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness* (2008), 68-9. Although scholars emphasize the prominence of this conception of blindness, it is one notion among several and should not be interpreted as the only possible interpretation of the blind body in antiquity. See especially M.L. Rose, *Staff of Oedipus* (2003), 92-3.

[30] Plato, *Timaeus* 45.

[31] Margaret Tallmadge May, *Galen: On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body* (Ithaca, 1968), 472-3, n. 19. As May notes, in addition to *De usu partium* X 2.66, the clearest exposition of Galen's understanding of vision is in *De plac. Hipp. et Plat.* VII 5.

punitive and metaphorical blindness in the ancient world.[32] We will not attempt to survey all of the Greek and Roman references to punitive[33] or pedagogical blindness that rehearse and modify the notion that blindness is divine punishment or the result of ignorance. Instead, we will focus on the depictions of both physical and metaphorical blindness in Hades to reveal the way in which Christian visions of hell intensify these images.

3a. *Physical blindness in Hades*

In the pagan depictions of Hades there are instances of individuals who are physically blind, but their blindness is not part of the punitive dimension of Hades.[34] In *Odyssey* 10, Teiresias the blind seer is depicted as 'super-rational', the only person who has been granted reason by Persephone after death.[35] Although Teiresias' blindness may have been the result of divine punishment,[36] there is no trace of that concept here, where his blindness actually endows him with special powers.[37] In Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*, passages that mention blind persons in Hades indicate that in death the blind look like everyone else: 'Everyone's eyes are all alike – empty, with nothing but sockets'.[38] Apart

[32] For examples see Michael E. Monbeck, *The Meaning of Blindness: Attitudes Toward Blindness and Blind People* (Bloomington, 1977), 22-65; R. Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder* (1995), 87-104; John M. Hull, *In the Beginning there was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible* (Harrisburg, 2001), 94-119; C. Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness* (2008), 68-75.

[33] As Candida R. Moss, 'The Righteous Amputees: Salvation and the Sinful Body in Mark 9', lecture at Yale Divinity School, September 25, 2014, has noted, eye gouging was not a formal punitive process, but a cultural obsession. See also L. Trentin, 'Exploring Visual Impairment' (2013), 101.

[34] In the punitive scenes in Hades in *Odyssey* 11, Plutarch's *Delays of the Divine Vengeance*, Plato's *Republic*, or in Lucian's comedic tours detailed punishments are described, but none of them ocular.

[35] In Homer *Od.* 10, Teiresias is sought out for prophecy because his 'mind remains steadfast', and 'to him in death Persephone has granted reason, that he alone should have understanding, but that others flit about as shadows'.

[36] Pseudo-Apollodorus records two separate stories about Teiresias' blindness as divine punishment, one in which he is blinded by Athena because he saw her naked, and another in which he is blinded by Hera for saying that women enjoy the pleasures of love more strongly than men (*Bibliotheca* 3.6.7). N. Vlahogiannis, 'Disabling Bodies' (1998), 30-1; C. Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness* (2008), 69.

[37] Teiresias is not alone. There are other examples of 'blind seers' or prophets in ancient literature, including Phineus, Phormio, Ophioneus, and the story of Democritus who blinds himself in order to gain spiritual insight. Eleftheria A. Bernidaki-Aldous, *Blindness in a Culture of Light: Especially the Case of Oedipus at Colonus of Sophocles* (New York, 1990), 72-94; C. Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness* (2008), 77.

[38] Lucian, *Dial. Mort.* 9.1.445. Here Menippus encounters Tiresias, commenting that he cannot identify him. See also, *Dial. Mort.* 22.9.444, in which we encounter a man who had partial vision loss (ἀμυδρὸν βλέπων), was lame and was a beggar on earth, who tells Diogenes that he would have preferred to remain in that state on earth than to be dead in Hades. Although Diogenes tells the man that he is 'mad', the implicit message of the text is that in death he no longer has a visual impairment.

from these few references to the blind seer and the common fate of the dead, physical blindness does not play much of a role in Greek and Roman depictions of Hades. And while Plutarch imagines that souls in the afterlife have eyes, the torments that are meted out by Dikē are not ocular.[39] Thus, although the notion of blindness as divine punishment was commonly accepted in some contexts, it was not considered to be a punishment that was fit for Hades, where, according to Plutarch, souls underwent 'torments that in magnitude and intensity far transcend those that pass through the flesh'.[40]

3b. *Metaphorical and pedagogical blindness in Hades*

Although punitive blindness does not play a role in Hades, the metaphor of sight and blindness is used repeatedly to describe the education of the soul that occurs in Hades. The Platonic imagery of educating a soul as a journey from blindness toward sight is not unique to tours of Hades, but is a component of ancient pedagogical rhetoric that is developed in the Greek and Latin tours of hell.[41] For instance, in Plutarch's *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance* sight is a metaphor for the education that occurs in Hades, depicting the soul 'opened wide as if it were a single eye', that learns from the punishments of Dikē and returns to a second birth.[42] In this vision, if a soul sees properly in Hades it is deemed educated enough to return to earth, and by way of contrast the souls that are in torment are metaphorically 'blind', trapped in Hades because they do not understand.[43] Here Hades is the vehicle for bringing sight to blind souls, using blindness as a metaphor for the uneducated. In Lucian's *Menippus*, the title character uses a similar metaphor when conversing with Teiresias at the conclusion of his journey through hell, begging Teiresias to tell him 'what sort of life he considered the best'. Menippus frames his question, with the language of sight: 'Tell me, and don't allow me to go about in life blinder than you are'. Menippus' question forces a comparison between his own metaphorical blindness and the bodily blindness of Teiresias, implying that metaphorical blindness is far worse than visual impairment.[44] Unlike the Christian tours of hell that depict visual impairment as a punishment, these pagan depictions of Hades hold out moral or spiritual blindness as the worst possible fate, far worse than physical blindness.

[39] Plutarch, *De Sera* 565B-C.
[40] Plutarch, *De Sera* 565B.
[41] The details of the pedagogical metaphor are outlined in Plato *Resp.* 518-19.
[42] Plutarch, *De Sera* 563F-567F.
[43] See also Plutarch, *De Sera* 591E-F, in which some of the souls that have seen the torments of Hades become bright stars and are said to 'possess understanding', while others are extinguished and 'sink entirely into the body'.
[44] Lucian, *Menippus* 21.

4. Conclusion

Returning to Himmelfarb's assertion that blindness is an 'appropriate' punishment for 'lack of self awareness or self-criticism', we can see that this logic was by no means a given in the ancient world. While Himmelfarb is correct that blindness could serve as a metaphor for ignorance or a lack of education, apocalyptic visions of hell do not simply replicate this logic. As we have seen, pagan depictions of Hades do not equate metaphorical and physical or punitive blindness. It is only in Christian depictions of hell that we find the blind bodies of the unperfected catechumens (*Apoc. Zeph.* 10), the conspicuously pious who do not strive for righteousness (*Apoc. Pet.* 12), and the almsgivers who did not know the Lord (*Apoc. Paul* 40). In these visions of damnation the blind body is demoted from the place it holds in Lucian's vision of Hades – physical blindness is no longer to be preferred to spiritual blindness, but is its artifact.

While it is true that the Christian notion of blindness in hell draws upon the culturally available concepts of metaphorical and pedagogical blindness, we have to be careful about overstating the predominance of this trope in the ancient world – either because it appeals to a similar logic that exists within our own world, or because we wish to theologically distance ourselves from ancient Christian attitudes toward disability as mere cultural artifacts. In their imaginations of hell, Christians developed a unique pedagogy of blindness that is horrifying in the ancient context as well as in our contemporary context, though for very different reasons. As the conceptions of blindness as metaphor and punishment are fused in the context of the early Christian apocalypse, the idea that physical blindness is the consequence of sin is intensified and codified. For the blind person in antiquity the early Christian vision of hell interprets their daily bodily existence as a kind of living hell. Therefore, the eternally blind who reside in Christian hell serve as a pedagogical example that not only demonstrates the consequences of earthly sins, but also teaches us today about the grave ethical consequences of our metaphors.

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